

## Sirarpie Der Nersessian

### 1896–1989

The news of the death of Professor-emerita Sirarpie Der Nersessian on July 5, 1989 affected scholars everywhere, and most particularly at Dumbarton Oaks, with whose growth and welfare she was closely and devotedly associated for more than seventeen years of her professional life—from her first arrival in Washington as a Senior Fellow in 1944–45, followed by her permanent appointment to its staff and Board of Scholars in 1946, her distinction by Harvard University as Henri Focillon Professor of Art and Archaeology in 1953, and her service as Deputy and Acting Director of Studies in 1953–55 and 1961–62 until her retirement in 1963. The entire field of Armeno-Byzantine art history, which she initiated and came to dominate, has become identified with her even for those to whom she was but a distant name. For all of them her disappearance creates a major watershed. Yet, despite the well-documented evidence of her eminence, a fulsome panegyric seems especially inappropriate for an intensely modest and private woman who would have been dismayed by it. She appreciated recognition but was never impressed by it. Without stinting other claims, she concentrated her energies on the work that was the core of her life, and her confidences within her immediate circle of intimates: first and foremost, her elder sister Arax with whom she shared most of her life, whose forced absence during the German occupation of France was a cause for unrelenting anxiety, whose presence and constant collaboration were a perpetual source of strength and creative ability, and for whom she cared with boundless devotion during her final illness; the small group of childhood friends she kept to the end, and of colleagues from Paris, Wellesley, and Dumbarton Oaks, such as the late Father Francis Dvornik and Alexander Vasiliev or André Grabar, with whom she spoke weekly by telephone until her death; and finally the rare

few whom she honored with the name “spiritual children,” on whose work she left an indelible mark even when their fields of research differed from hers. As those who have written of her invariably noted, she was a personality but never a “character.” Those who knew her as a child remembered her as a tomboy, but she was not one of whom touching or amusing anecdotes masking a patronizing tone could be told.

The facts of her brilliant scholarly career are well known and easily rehearsed.<sup>1</sup> Sirarpie Der Nersessian was born in Constantinople on September 5, 1896, the youngest of three children, to a family dominated by her distinguished maternal uncle, the theologian, church historian and administrator Malachia Ormanian, the Armenian patriarch of Constantinople from 1896 to his voluntary retirement in 1908. The impact of his personality and scholarly interests was still vivid in her mind more than a half century later. She was ideally placed to learn at first hand the intellectual standards and political travails of the contemporary Armenian community. From the beginning, her milieu prepared the twin aspects of her life: an intense devotion to the Armenian cultural tradition and an international rather than a parochial point of view already visible in her early education based on French, English, and Armenian, which she shared with her sister. This cosmopolitan education was furthered when the growing anti-Armenian violence in Turkey forced the already orphaned girls, who were soon to lose their closest Ormanian relatives, to move in 1915 to Switzerland and eventually France. There Sirarpie completed her studies at the Sorbonne and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes de l'Université de Paris under

<sup>1</sup> See J. S. Allen, “Sirarpie Der Nersessian (b. 1896): Educator and Scholar in Byzantine and Armenian Art,” in C. R. Sherman and A. M. Holcomb, *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820–1979* (Westport, Conn.-London, 1981), 329–56.



the great Byzantinists and art historians Charles Diehl, Henri Focillon, and Gabriel Millet. There too she began her professional career under the aegis of Millet whose assistant she became in 1922, with whom she published one of her earliest articles (1929), who furthered her appointment as *Chargée de cours temporaire* at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes* (1927–29), and who eventually presided over and wrote the preface to one of the two theses she presented for the *Doctorat d'Etat* she received with highest honors in 1936. Both of these received prizes from the *Académies des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* and *des Etudes Grecques* when they were published in 1937.

Before the completion of her formal training in France, Sirarpie Der Nersessian moved to the United States on the recommendation of the eminent Byzantinists Charles Rufus Morey, Albert Mathias Friend, Jr., and Walter Cook. The new career she inaugurated in America was divided almost equally between Wellesley College—to which she came as a Part-time Lecturer in 1930 and served for some sixteen years, rising rapidly to the position of Full Professor, Chairman of the Department of Art History, and Director of the Farnsworth Museum (1937–46) and with which she kept a concerned affiliation as a two-term trustee (1949–61)—and her seventeen years spent at Dumbarton Oaks, from which she returned with her sister to France on her retirement.

The honors she received testify eloquently to the appreciation of her colleagues wherever she went: two honorary degrees in the United States (1948, 1957); the Medal of the Order of St. Gregory the Illuminator, first class, bestowed on her by the Katholikos of Armenia, H. H. Vasgen I (1960); the Fould and Schlumberger prizes of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1936, 1963); the Gold Medal of the Society of Antiquaries (1970); and her election as Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America and corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian S.S.R. (1966), the British Academy (1975), and the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1978). The publications listed in the vast bibliography appended to her collected articles, *Etudes byzantines et arméniennes*, 2 vols. (Louvain, 1973, II, 167–70)—which she was persuaded to accept in lieu of the *Festschrift* usually offered to scholars of far less distinction that she refused as unsuitable and unnecessary—reflect both her devotion to the research field she created and her wide erudition. Her publication of the illuminated manuscript col-

lections of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice, the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, and the Freer and Walters galleries in the United States testifies to the breadth of her horizon. Her primary concern with the investigation and exposition of the formerly little studied Armenian art is evident in all of these as well as in her *Aght'amar: Church of the Holy Cross* (1965), her monumental *L'art arménien* (1977), immediately published in English, and what she hoped would be the synthesis of much of her research concerning "The Painting of Cilician Armenia," on which she worked to the very end with the help of a devoted assistant and which will be published by Dumbarton Oaks. As she wrote in the preface of her *Etudes byzantines et arméniennes* (I, vii), she viewed her goal as the presentation of Armenian art, not only for its own sake as an isolated manifestation, but in the broadest possible context:

La partie relative à l'Arménie est plus importante par le nombre des articles. Au cours de ces dernières années notre attention s'est portée davantage vers ce domaine, moins exploré que le byzantin, et où nous pouvions faire connaître des oeuvres inédites. Il nous semblait aussi que notre formation de byzantiniste, et la connaissance des autres arts du Proche-Orient, nous permettaient de mieux situer l'art arménien dans le cadre de la civilisation du Moyen Age.

As a scholar, Sirarpie Der Nersessian showed respect for sources, practiced a close reading of them, and followed them as reliable guides at the expense of scholarly fads. An impartial inflexibility of standards joined to a catholicity of approach eschewing any unilateral view of a subject marked both her own work and the advice she gave unwearyingly to students and younger scholars in classes and seminars at Wellesley, sitting quietly by the pool at Dumbarton Oaks, or over the tea table of her Paris apartment. There her influence reached its broadest sweep. But in more recent years she missed visits from old friends and colleagues who were able now to fly directly from the United States to distant destinations instead of taking the boat to France and passing through Paris.

Neither her retiring nature nor the rigorous standards she applied first to herself ever made her rigid, cold, or humorless. She criticized inadequate work but was never heard to speak ill of anyone. Her devotion to her own background was expressed in the directive to send her library and voluminous archives to Erevan where they might further the research of her Armenian colleagues. Her thoughtfulness and care reached beyond her

immediate circle to include and assist the Spanish nuns and housekeeper who had helped nurse her sister. But there was more: the few surviving colleagues from the Dumbarton Oaks years remember the calm and sweetness with which she suggested reasonable solutions and smoothed ruffled feathers all around. She supported students and colleagues whenever it lay in her power and left all she possessed to endow a fellowship which would enable an art student from the Armenian S.S.R. to come yearly to benefit from the rigorous cosmopolitan training she had once enjoyed and valued so highly. Above all else she prized honesty and the loyalty she gave wholeheartedly to institutions such

as Wellesley, Dumbarton Oaks, and the Armenian organizations she supported, as well as to individuals—her sister, teachers, friends, and “spiritual children.” It is a truism that real values, intellectual and human, are rarely met in any lifetime, but those of us who were granted the opportunity to touch them in her will not soon forget the privilege.

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